

Istook says more local funds needed for I-40 relocation

By Steve Lackmeyer and Carmel Perez Snyder Staff Writers

U.S. Rep. Ernest Istook is warning that completion of a relocated Interstate 40 Crosstown Expressway could be delayed until 2014 without local or state participation in the \$360 million project.

In response, some city and county officials are reluctantly weighing suggestions made by the Warr Acres Republican at a recent Greater Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce retreat that funding gaps could be covered by either a bond issue or taxincrement financing.

Oklahoma County commissioners Chairman Stan Inman, who attended the retreat, said local leaders are being asked whether they prefer contributing local funding or accepting a fiveyear delay for the highway.

"The city and I haven't gotten to talk about this, but I think both of us are hesitant to use public money on a federal project," Inman said. "Certainly, I-40 is much bigger than Oklahoma City or Oklahoma County."

Istook and fellow members of the state's congressional delegation the past few years have secured \$180 million for the project, leaving it short another \$180 million. State officials have long argued their construction of turnpikes qualifies as a "soft match" for Oklahoma's share of the project.

"That meets the legal requirements, but it doesn't generate the federal funds," Istook said.

Istook said local and state leaders should consider an upcoming emphasis by the Bush administration on "private-public" partnerships to fund highway projects.

"It's a variation of tax-increment financing," Istook said. "You use the enhanced value that transportation brings to an area and bring the private beneficiaries to help pay for the improvements."

Istook can't say yet how much of a funding gap will remain after Congress passes a fiveyear highway authorization bill. However, he warned the final construction phase — a \$35 million boulevard to access downtown — probably would be delayed if the project relies solely on federal funding.

Istook said such delays could stall development of the nearby Oklahoma River.

"You can construct this new portion of Interstate 40 with federal funds, but it will take longer," Istook said. "And by taking longer, it will delay some of the other things that are important to revitalization efforts in Oklahoma City."

Mayor Mick Cornett said he will consider Istook's suggestions — including the use of taxincrement financing.

“Most of our attention has been on the planning issues,” Cornett said. “Our stance on this hasn’t changed. This has been our No. 1 priority for five years, and it remains so.”

Istook reserved his biggest challenge for Gov. Brad Henry, again questioning why state leaders think the most expensive highway project in Oklahoma’s history can be built without state funding.

“It would be nice for Governor Henry to step up to the plate and make a commitment on this issue,” Istook said. “So far, I haven’t heard anything.”

Henry thanked Istook for his support for the highway project, and agreed on its importance — but argued the state can’t be looked to for money.

Henry said that despite the efforts of Istook and Sen. Jim Inhofe, congressional failure to pass a long-term highway plan also stumps the ability for the state to make long-term commitments.

Repairing roads and bridges, considered to be some of the worst in the nation, are a higher priority for the state, Henry said.

I-40 funding options

+ Reconstruction cost: \$360 million. + Expected federal share: \$248 million.

+ Federal funding to date: \$180 million. + Local options: State appropriations, city or county bond issue and tax increment financing.